

THE SPRING, 1640, PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION AT ABINGDON

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CHARLES I's government was facing a crisis of major proportions by the autumn of 1639. The financial situation was desperate, Scotland was in revolt, ship money was uncollectible and the religious question was increasingly dividing his own subjects. Parliament had not been summoned for more than a decade but it was more and more evident that Charles's personal rule was crumbling. Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, urged the calling of parliament and, by early December, 1639, his view finally prevailed with both the King and his councillors.¹ Parliament would be summoned for April, 1640, to provide the financial support Charles's government so urgently required.

The news of the King's decision quickly spread and, within a few days, the election contests began. There was, as Edward Nicholas and others noted, great 'labouring by divers to be parliament men.'² Borough corporations, tenants and freeholders, friends and relatives, soon found themselves reading the letters of

nomination and commendation from the courtiers, royal officials, influential noblemen, and families of their respective counties and boroughs. Berkshire, Reading, New Windsor and Abingdon were no exceptions. Both Sir Francis Cottington, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Sir Edmund Sawyer, another royal official, laboured without success to assist Sir Francis Windebank, a principal secretary of state, in his quest of a knightsip of the shire.³ Henry Rich, Earl of Holland and favourite of Queen Henrietta Maria, was High Steward of both Reading and New Windsor and made nominations at both places while Reading, the birthplace of Archbishop William Laud, also enjoyed his election favours.⁴

Abingdon, it seems, was without such influential patronage in the spring of 1640. Its election history reflected the power of the Lovelace, Knollys and Stonehouse families.⁵ And, given their hitherto successful election influence, Abingdon was hardly the place to expect a factious election contest. Sir Richard

¹ The King to the Lords of the Council, 6th December, 1639, P.R.O., S. P. Dom., 16/435:37; Vane to Sir Thomas Roe, 21st February, 1640, P.R.O., S. P. Dom., 16/446:3; Nicholas to Pennington, 12th December, 1639, P.R.O., S. P. Dom., 16/435:64; W. Scott and J. Bliss, eds., *The Works of Archbishop William Laud* (7 vols., Oxford, 1847-1860), iii, 233, 282-283; Bellievre to de Chavigny, 22nd December, 1639, P.R.O., French Trans., 3/71; Wentworth to Radcliffe, T. D. Whitaker, *The Life and Original Correspondence of Sir George Radcliffe* (London, 1810), 187.

² Nicholas to Pennington, 12th December, 1639, P.R.O., S. P. Dom., 16/435:64; Poley to D'Ewes, no date, 1639, B. M. Harl. MS. 383, f. 144; B. M. Add. MS. 35,331, f. 74v.

³ Sir Edmund Sawyer to Robert Read, 13th December, 1639, P.R.O., S. P. Dom., 16/435:72.

⁴ Earl of Holland to the Mayor and Aldermen of Windsor, 9th December, 1639, Great Britain, Historical Manuscripts Commission (Hereafter cited as HMC), *Report on the Manuscripts in Various Collections* (8 vols., London, 1901-1914), viii, 53; R. Tighe and J. Davis, eds., *Annals of Windsor* (2 vols., London, 1858), ii, 91; J. M. Guilding, ed., *Reading Records, Diary of the Corporation, 1431-1654* (4 vols., London and Oxford, 1892-1896), iii, 472, 475-476; The Victoria History of the Counties of England, *History of the County of Berkshire* (4 vols., London, 1906-1924), ii, 40; A. Aspinall, ed., *Parliament Through Seven Centuries, Reading and its Members of Parliament* (London, 1962), 50-52.

⁵ Berkshire Record Office, D/EP 7/80, List of Abingdon Members of Parliament, films 10-14.

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Lovelace had succeeded to his father's estate at Lady Place, Hurley, in 1602 and had represented Abingdon in James's first parliament. He had also served for Berkshire in 1601 and 1621 and was elected at New Windsor in 1614. Sir Richard had also probably secured the election of his stepson, Sir Robert Hyde, in 1621. One of Sir Richard's daughters, Margaret, married into another prominent Berkshire family, the Stonehouse's of Radley, West Abingdon. Her husband, Sir George Stonehouse, was one of Abingdon's candidates in the spring election. He had succeeded to his father's estates after the death of his elder brother, John, in February, 1632. The Stonehouse family had substantial court connections. John, who had served for Abingdon in the Parliament of 1628, had been a Gentleman of the Bedchamber to Charles I while his grandfather had served as a Clerk of the Green Cloth to Elizabeth I. An uncle, Sir James Stonehouse, was a member of James I's Privy Chamber. Sir George, although he held no royal office, had been active in county affairs and had served as Sheriff of Berkshire in 1637-38.⁶ Abingdon's other burgess was Sir Robert Knollys. He had served for Abingdon in the Parliaments of 1614, 1624, 1625 and 1626, thanks to the influence of his uncle, William Knollys, Earl of Banbury and High Steward of the borough.⁷ Given Abingdon's election record, the dominance of its High Steward and the influence of established Berkshire families, there was no reason to suspect that its spring election would prove a source of discord and faction. However, Abingdon, like so many other boroughs and cities of England, was to be effected by the divisions that were appearing in the spring election contests.

Three men stood in contention for Abingdon's election favours. Sir George Stonehouse

was an obvious candidate, given his close connections and county influence. Sir Robert Knollys was another, although his candidature was very short-lived. He had written to the mayor and corporation but their reactions to his efforts, plus his apparent realization that Stonehouse would have little difficulty in carrying it from him, seemingly caused his early withdrawal.⁸ The third candidate, Bulstrode Whitelock, of Phillis Court and Fawley, Buckinghamshire, might be described as an 'outsider'. Although he held no property in Berkshire or Abingdon, he was connected with the borough as its recorder and had served in that capacity for many years.⁹

Whitelock had not sought the place. On 11th December, Joseph Tisdale, a principal burgess of the corporation, invited him to stand for the burgess-ship of Parliament. Tisdale reported that the Mayor had already informed 'the principal burgesses and bailiffs' of the candidacies of Stonehouse and Knollys. He was certain that Knollys had little, if any, chance against Stonehouse and had been very quick to place Whitelock's name before the corporation. 'I was bold to name you,' he continued, 'and also to tell the company that upon my knowledge you did expect it and that in my opinion, although Sir George Stonehouse were (*sic*) a very worthy gentleman, our near neighbour and loving friend, yet for divers causes, I thought you to be most fit to be our burgess'.¹⁰ Whitelock must have been somewhat surprised; there is no evidence at all that he 'expected' Abingdon's seat. His nomination provoked a mixed reaction amongst members of the corporation. Some members doubted Whitelock would stand, assuming he had already secured a place elsewhere. Stonehouse's supporters were either more vociferous in their praise of Sir George or simply dismissed

⁶ B.R.O., D/EP 7/80, Film no. 10, 'Sir Richard Lovelace'; Film no. 12, 'Sir Robert Hyde'; Film no. 13, 'John Stonehouse'; Film no. 14, 'Sir George Stonehouse'; Agnes C. Baker, *Historic Abingdon, Parliamentary History* (Abingdon, 1963) 72-73.

⁷ B.R.O., D/EP 7/80, Film no. 11, 'Sir Robert

Knollys'; Agnes C. Baker, *Historic Abingdon, Parliamentary History* (Abingdon, 1963). 70-71.

⁸ Whitelock's Memorials, B. M., Add. MS. 37,343 f. 198.

⁹ M. F. Keeler, *The Long Parliament* (Philadelphia, 1954), 392-393.

¹⁰ B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 198.

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Whitelock's election chances. That, Tisdale argued, was only to be expected; they were partisans for him anyway and would 'speak as they would have it.'¹¹

Tisdale was concerned about Whitelock's candidacy but there were reasons for hope. Stonehouse had failed to ask for the corporation's immediate promise of Abingdon's seat, perhaps because of his confidence about the election. By so doing, Tisdale believed he had given Whitelock an opportunity since had Stonehouse asked for a 'present answer, . . . I perceived by some of the company that he should have had fair promises'.¹² As a result, Whitelock's supporters had time to mount a campaign in his behalf. Furthermore, Whitelock was an attractive candidate. He was Abingdon's recorder and well known to the corporation's members who were the sole voters in the borough. Abingdon's charter, issued in 1555, limited participation in parliamentary elections to the mayor, bailiffs and burgesses of the corporation. These provisions gave Tisdale further cause for optimism. Whitelock was well known to the borough's leadership and, as Tisdale wrote, Stonehouse was campaigning amongst ineligible voters, the 'commons' of Abingdon. Not only would this be wasted effort, it might also serve to alienate members of the corporation who, by the borough charter, had exclusive election privileges.¹³

Whitelock was reluctant to involve himself. He was aware of the significance of the impending parliament and the issues it might face or, as he put it, 'of the danger of the time of the employment'. However, Tisdale was a 'plain hearty friend' and his letter, plus other correspondence from Abingdon caused Whitelock to reconsider his position. There was another reason, as well, for Whitelock's changing mood. His friends stressed his obligations in such trying

times. What is most intriguing about such persuasion is that it originated with those 'of the contrary faction to the court, and who favoured the Scots Covenanters'. Whitelock finally surrendered to the arguments of his supporters and agreed to stand.¹⁴ His decision made a contested election a certainty.

With Whitelock's candidacy, the Abingdon election assumed a new and larger dimension. It became part of the broader, national picture of the spring, 1640, elections, a picture which frequently reflected the struggle between 'court' and 'country' for election success. Why had those 'of the contrary faction to the court' so earnestly pressed Whitelock's candidacy? One explanation is readily available: by the spring of 1640, Whitelock could be identified as a possible opponent of the court. He had opposed the extension of the forests, had evidenced his opposition to the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts and, most significantly, provided legal counsel and advice to John Hampden and his lawyers during the famous ship money case.¹⁵ But, however notable these credentials were, Abingdon's residents had a far more personal remembrance of Whitelock's views.

In 1634, Whitelock became entangled in a pair of related disputes which finally led him to a commanded appearance before the Privy Council. The whole dispute grew out of an Abingdon mayoralty contest. Two principal burgesses were to be elected and one was to be chosen as Abingdon's new mayor. Two factions fought the contest; one Richard Barton was agreed upon by both sides as a new principal burgess but John Mayott and Benjamin Tisdale tied for the Mayoralty. Tisdale, it was alleged in a petition to the Council following the contest, 'procured himself to be tendered with Mr Barton by Mr Whitelock, the recorder to the principal burgesses and bailiffs, to be by them chosen mayor for this year.' Mayott's supporters urged

¹¹ B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 198.

¹² B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 198.

¹³ B. Challenor, ed., *Selections from the Municipal Chronicles of the Borough of Abingdon* (Abingdon,

1898), 7; B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 198.

¹⁴ B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 198.

¹⁵ M. F. Keeler, *The Long Parliament* (Philadelphia, 1954), 392.

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a Privy Council investigation and a delay in the 'swearing of the new mayor'.¹⁶ The result of the complaint, ledged by Mayott and his faction, is obscure but, within six weeks Mayott was again petitioning the Privy Council about another issue which led to Whitelock's appearance at the board.¹⁷ And from that petition and Whitelock's own account, it does not seem that Mayott won the mayoralty contest.

Complaints were made to the mayor, Tisdale, and to Whitelock, during the autumn of 1634, about 'divers in the town who were non-conformists to the orders and ceremonies of the church in divine service, as, that some did not stand up at the Creed, nor bow to the altar, nor at the name of Jesus, nor receive the sacrament kneeling at the high altar, and the like.'¹⁸ Whitelock was deeply embroiled in the controversy which was further embittered by the fact that some of those making the allegation 'were related to the ecclesiastical court'. Whitelock and the Mayor were strongly urged to punish the offenders but Whitelock gave them little satisfaction. He told the complainants that the alleged offences were 'more properly punishable by the ecclesiastical judges in their courts than by justices of peace' and urged them to report it all to the appropriate church officials. He drily admitted they 'seemed much unsatisfied herewith' particularly since the Mayor, 'being somewhat inclined to the opinions of the nonconformists' would do nothing to satisfy them either. Indeed, in the meeting between the complainants and Whitelock, Whitelock could not resist the opportunity to offer a little lecture. He pointed out that he 'was much for liberty of conscience, and favourable in that point'.¹⁹ The controversy takes on added significance since John Mayott, the defeated candidate for Mayor, petitioned the Privy Council over this dispute

in November, 1634. Mayott complained about 'Edward Rood, now Vicar of Abingdon' who had been throughout his entire four year residency in Abingdon 'a great disturber of the peace of the town' through his involvement in town affairs and his 'publishing (of) strange doctrines tending to factions and dissensions.' Rood was certainly indiscreet. Mayott accused him of preaching about 'State business', of denying the King's supremacy and of claiming, in a sermon given in October, that 'a minister was above the King in businesses ecclesiastical'. Rood was 'convented before the mayor' who ordered the talkative vicar to appear before the Privy Council to answer for his intemperant statements. But, so Mayott claimed, Rood was never forced to do so. Mayott wanted the board to take a more direct role in the affair.²⁰ The unnamed mayor sounds very much like the man Whitelock described as being 'somewhat inclined to the opinions of the nonconformists.' Indeed, Mayott's complaint probably had a double purpose: to attack the non-conforming vicar and his band and to strike back at Whitelock and the mayor, Tisdale, who had combined to deprive him of the Mayoralty.

Mayott must have been successful. Whitelock soon found himself before the Privy Council, 'to answer some complaints made against him from Abingdon.' Whitelock was accused of both complying with and giving countenance to 'the non-conformists there (Abingdon)' and of refusing to punish them for their misdeeds. Before the interview was over, Whitelock was assailed as being 'disaffected to the church, and the ceremonies thereof enjoined by authority.' Whitelock was ready for the Councillors. He argued that he knew of no 'common law nor statute in force for the punishment of them, especially by justices of the peace' and then

¹⁶ 'Petition of Inhabitants of Abingdon, Berks., to the Council,' 27th September, 1634, Great Britain, Public Record Office, *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Charles I* (23 vols., London, 1858-1897), hereafter cited as *CSPD*, vii, 217.

¹⁷ 'Petition of Robert Mayott, of Abingdon, Berks., gentleman, to the Council,' November, 1634,

CSPD, vii, 311-312.

¹⁸ Bulstrode Whitelock, *Memorials of the English Affairs* (4 vols., London, 1853), i, 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ 'Petition of Robert Mayott, of Abingdon, Berks., gentleman, to the Council,' November, 1634, *CSPD*, vii, 311-312.

stressed that the only offences committed by the non-conformists were spiritual offences and, as such, were 'proper for spiritual judges'. After all, Whitelock drily noted, he 'might have been censured to encroach upon the jurisdiction and rights of the church if he should have cognizance of them'.²¹ Whitelock had turned the tables neatly and fended off, with considerable wit, the Councillors' concern. The Privy Council was satisfied with his answers and dismissed him from its presence. There can be little doubt that both sides in the Abingdon controversy well remembered Whitelock's role in the whole affair. The 'contrary faction' which urged him to stand knew first hand of his views and sympathies as did those whom he frustrated in their efforts, first to see Mayott elected Mayor and then to see good and meet religious discipline enforced on all the town's citizens. Thus, for both local and more national reasons, the contest between Stonehouse and Whitelock took on the aspects of a 'court versus country' affair and provided another example of that clash in the spring elections.

Both factions campaigned vigorously for the parliamentary seat. Whitelock 'Wrote many letters' canvassing for support and admitted he had 'much trouble and some charge' in his election effort.²² Stonehouse, however, was a more zealous campaigner. He had some immediate and useful advantages over the absent Whitelock. Both as a Justice of the Peace and as a 'near neighbour' to Abingdon, he was able to bring his influence to bear with considerable force. His methods testified to the heat of the contest. Economic pressure and free food and drink proved more effective than anything Whitelock could do. A rather bitter and self-righteous Whitelock recounted Stonehouse's successful approach to the election. Stonehouse, he complained, 'wrought by means more effectual upon the vulgar people' to carry the day. 'He employed his butcher, brewer, vintner, shoe maker, tailor and others the like instru-

ments to labour for him and therein for themselves' to win the election. His qualifications for the place, as opposed to Whitelock's experience and position, were, if not totally ignored in the campaign, given secondary consideration because 'above all arguments he persuaded by his beef, bacon and bag pudding, and by permitting as many of them as would to be drunk at his charge, at the alehouse in town' to cast their voices for him. Whitelock sarcastically noted that 'By these laudable means, he convinced their judgments, that therefore he was the ablest person to serve' for Abingdon.²³ Whitelock claimed to be above such practices although, as it turned out, much to his cost.

Abingdon's citizens witnessed what must have been a memorable election day. Stonehouse's schemes, his outlays on food, wine and beer, succeeded beyond all dignity. The townsfolk must have watched with both amusement and awe as their near neighbour, representative of a well known family and Justice of the Peace, found himself on the shoulders of his rather drunken supporters who, 'crying in strong drink and zeal, A Stonehouse, A Stonehouse' carried the poll and the election for him.²⁴ No doubt Whitelock's supporters, particularly those amongst the corporation, suffered equally strong but different reactions to the scene!

Whitelock was vexed by his failure. Despite the support of the Mayor and most of the corporation, the commonalty had proven decisive and were to blame for his defeat. He pondered upon his long service as Abingdon's recorder and complained that he 'now enjoyed the usual reward of doing service for the people, to be neglected and affronted by those for whom I had done all this service.'²⁵ But all was not yet lost or so Whitelock's supporters thought.

Whitelock was promptly urged by 'many persons of the better sort' to vindicate himself and the privileges of Abingdon by petitioning against Stonehouse's election. The election had violated Abingdon's charter which denied the

²¹ Bulstrode Whitelock, *Memorials of the English Affairs* (4 vols., London, 1853), i, 66-67.

²² B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 198.

²³ B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 199.

²⁴ B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 199.

²⁵ B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, f. 198v.

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commons any voice at all. After further discussion, Whitelock left for London, 'being resolved to petition the house of commons' against Stonehouse's election triumph.²⁶

No petition was ever presented by Whitelock and his supporters to overturn the Abingdon election. What had happened to the plans of Whitelock and his supporters? Two explanations may be offered. One possibility is that the petition was prepared but parliament was dissolved so quickly, after but three short weeks, that time did not allow the presentation of the petition. That seems questionable since Abingdon's election was the 19th of March, almost a month before the parliament began. That should have been ample time in which to organize the petition. Numerous election petitions were presented and the committee of privileges appears as one of the most diligent of house committees. It was established on the third day of the session and went immediately to work, setting aside three afternoons a week for its labours. It is true, however, that despite its energy, it was still faced with fresh election petitions as late as 2nd May, just three days before the abrupt dissolution, but Whitelock's allies had had since the 19th of March to organize their complaint. Furthermore, had a petition been prepared, Whitelock's friends on the committee, including John Glyn, Edward Hyde and John Maynard, could have perhaps secured early action on Whitelock's election grievance.

The second explanation is even more speculative. Whitelock's friends on the committee might have simply informed him that Abingdon's petition would not be received with approval. The committee and the house, at least in three contested elections, had resolved the contests in favour of the broader franchise. Abingdon's petition required, on the other hand, a confirmation of its own narrow and restrictive franchise, something which the committee and the house might have not been willing to affirm. Whatever the reason may be, it is certainly well hidden. Whitelock's own account of events make

no mention of the fate of the petition although he does indicate his resolution to contest Stonehouse's return.²⁷

Whitelock, who had sought no other place, did not serve in the Short Parliament. And he did not easily forgive his Abingdon friends. He was back in Abingdon during the summer of 1640, carrying out his legal duties. There, 'some who had formerly professed great friendship to me, were now ashamed to look me in the face, having ungratefully and unworthily used me in opposing my being burgesse the last parliament'. Not only had they not supported him, Whitelock ruefully noted, they had in fact contributed to his ruin by assisting Sir George Stonehouse in his first successful bid for a seat in the House of Commons.²⁷ Whitelock did not forget his Abingdon experience; when the Long Parliament was summoned, there is nothing to indicate he considered standing again for Abingdon. He was eventually returned, in another hotly contested election, for Great Marlow, in Buckinghamshire, while Sir George Stonehouse was once again chosen for Abingdon.

Why had Whitelock failed in his bid for Abingdon's burgesse-ship? One reason is clear: his local influence did not extend beyond his supporters within Abingdon's governing corporation. Furthermore, his activities in the controversy over the mayoralty campaign and in the highly controversial religious dispute could have only divided his potential supporters in Abingdon. Thanks to those issues, and his involvement in them, Whitelock became representative of a particular faction within the community. His candidacy served to arouse his opponents and gave them an opportunity to finally enjoy their revenge for his past affronts. Stonehouse also enjoyed obvious advantages. His family was one of influence and reputation and his marriage alliance, to Lovelace's daughter, contributed further to his local prestige. His influence could be brought to bear with much more immediate effect. His election methods testified to that and also provide evidence of the closeness of the election struggle.

²⁶ B.M., Add. MS. 37,343, ff. 199, 201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

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Before the election was over, Stonehouse had been compelled to use economic threats and free food and drink, or what could be called bribery, to carry the election. Abingdon's contest was a bitter and devisive affair. White-

lock, a candidate of the 'contrary faction', and the royalist Stonehouse fought out an election battle that was but one example of many others in the Spring, 1640, election contests.